

# Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

## Study Guide, Part 1

### WHY STUDY THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY TODAY?

#### The 50th Anniversary of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (also known by its Latin title, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*) was the first document produced by the Second Vatican Council, and is arguably the most influential. The everyday lives of millions of Catholics around the world have been influenced by what it had to say. The *Constitution* was approved by an overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers (2,147 to 4), and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963. It set in motion the most far-reaching liturgical reform in Catholic history.

In 1985, the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops would look back and reflect that “the liturgical renewal is the most visible fruit of the whole work of the Council.” Pope John Paul II, on the document’s twenty-fifth anniversary, agreed: “For many people the message of the Second Vatican Council has been experienced principally through the liturgical reform.”

Another twenty-five years have passed since that time, and interest in the *Constitution* has not diminished, but grown. On its fortieth anniversary, Pope John Paul II opined that “With the passing of time and in light of its fruits, the importance of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has become increasingly clear” (*Spiritus et Sponsa*, 2). In June 2008, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a Homily via satellite to the forty-ninth International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec and exhorted the faithful to study this document. “I would like everyone to make a commitment to study this great mystery [the Eucharist],” he said, “especially by revisiting and exploring, individually and in groups, the Council’s text on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, so as to bear witness courageously to the mystery.”

In December 2013, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. This is a good time to revisit the words of this important document.

#### For Discussion

- ▶ What role does the liturgy play in your life as a Catholic Christian? How does the liturgy lead you to act in the world?
- ▶ What are the biggest challenges that you think the Church faces today?

#### How Did This Document Come to Be?

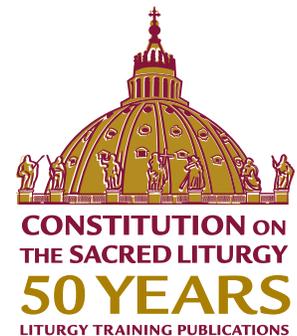
In the popular imagination, the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council are associated with the tumultuous 1960s, when “Times They Are A-Changin’” was on the radio, civil-rights protesters were in the streets, the Vietnam War was on the news, and the sexual revolution was changing attitudes at a startling pace. But this isn’t really the case. The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council were not a product of the 1960s. They developed gradually and originated in a much earlier era.

A new concern with recovering the original meaning of the liturgy surfaced in the nineteenth century in French and German Benedictine monasteries. It developed into a worldwide movement during the first half of the twentieth century. As early as 1903, Pope Pius X called for active participation in the rites of the Church, and solemnly identified the liturgy as “the indispensable fount” of the true Christian spirit in a document called *Tra le Sollecitudini*. His call for active participation was taken up by scholars and pastors in parishes, monasteries, schools, and religious houses around the world.

The Liturgical Movement, as it came to be called, began as an effort to study and understand the liturgy. Gradually, it became a movement of reform that sought to make the liturgy more accessible to everyone. Pope Pius XII endorsed the Liturgical Movement in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, written in 1947. He also sponsored several important liturgical reforms in the 1950s, restoring the Easter Vigil to its former glory on Holy Saturday night and reforming the other liturgies of Holy Week as well. The success of these efforts raised the expectations of many, and when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, liturgy was the first item on the agenda.

#### For Discussion

- ▶ What understanding did you have about the origins of the Second Vatican Council prior to now? How would you have summed up the impact of the Second Vatican Council prior to beginning this course of study?



- ▶ Do you have any personal memories or have you heard stories from family members, about what it was like to experience this period of liturgical reform in the Church?

### The Spirit of Liturgical Renewal

Two words that capture the spirit of the liturgical renewal of the Conciliar period are *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word that means “bringing things up to the present day.” Pope John XXIII called for the Church to update the presentation of its message. His call was motivated by pastoral concern. He did not want the Church to lose touch with the contemporary concerns and struggles of its people. *Ressourcement*, a French word, means “back to the sources,” that is, the study of liturgical history reaching back to the early centuries. Far from a sterile, archeological interest in the past, going back to the sources was a springboard for renewal, asking new questions of ancient texts.

At first glance, *ressourcement* may seem incompatible with *aggiornamento*, but they are complementary. “Sound tradition,” protected by the *Constitution* (CSL, 23) is not simply a matter of preserving “old stuff.” By going back to the sources, by studying and understanding the history of the liturgy, one can discern what is essential, what must be handed on in order to preserve the health of the Church in the present and sustain it in the future. A keen appreciation for how the Church’s message is heard today, in turn, helps the Church pass on its living tradition effectively, so that it can be grasped and owned by a new generation.

### For Discussion

- ▶ How do you feel that the Church continues to sustain her tradition and reach a contemporary audience today?

### What Happened After the Council?

To carry out of the Council’s directives in the *Constitution*, a host of practical decisions had to be made after the Council—by the pope, the consultative bodies that advised the pope, the conferences of bishops, and so on. It could not have been otherwise. The *Constitution* set a huge project in motion—one that is still going on today.

Since the *Constitution’s* appearance in 1963, there have been five official instructions on its proper implementation. They give specific permissions and guidance in carrying out the reform. Three of these instructions appeared in quick succession: *Inter Oecumenici* (1964), *Tres Abhinc Annos* (1967), and *Liturgicae Instaurationes* (1970). The other two appeared much later: *Varietates Legitimae* (1994) and *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001). These are Vatican documents, written for the worldwide Church. There are also other documents—written by popes, episcopal conferences, and individual bishops—that provide inspiration and guidance in carrying out the mandate of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.

Many crucial conciliar reforms are not explicitly mentioned in the pages of the *Constitution*. A few examples would be the position of the priest at the altar (Mass facing the people is endorsed in *Inter Oecumenici*), greater use of the vernacular (see *Tres Abhinc Annos*), and the inclusion of women in liturgical ministries (*Liturgicae Instaurationes* established this officially). It’s also worth noting that the *Constitution* does not discuss Eucharistic adoration; its primary focus was the celebration of the Eucharist. The document to consult concerning a renewed understanding of adoration would be *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, issued in 1973.

### For Discussion

- ▶ The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* calls liturgy the “summit and fount” of our life of faith (CSL, 10). To what degree does this describe your experience? Does it correspond with the attitude of people in your parish? Why or why not?

### One Great Work

The special virtue of studying the *Constitution* is that it is like the hub of a wheel. One can see, radiating outward from it, countless works of fidelity by the praying Church. Not only popes and bishops, pastors and religious, but all faithful Catholics have a part to play in its vision and mission. Within all the baptized is the call and privilege to be caught up in the work of the liturgy: the eternal praise of the Father by the Son, through the Holy Spirit. If at times we fail to do our part as well as we should, it remains, nevertheless, a great work and a vibrant calling.

### For Discussion

- ▶ Why have you chosen to take this opportunity to study the *Constitution*? What are you hoping to get out of this experience?

## HOW TO READ THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY

### Historical Context

When reading the *Constitution* today, it is important—as it is in reading any historical document—to understand its context. For this purpose, some additional reading can be helpful. Some publications that you might like to consult include:

- ▶ *Imbued with the Spirit of the Liturgy: Ten Insights from Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* by Fr. Joshua R. Brommer (Liturgy Training Publications, 2013). Also available in Spanish under the title *Impregnados del espíritu de la liturgia: Diez principios de la Constitución sobre la Sagrada Liturgia del Vaticano II*, translated by Jose Castillo (Liturgy Training Publications, 2013).

- ▶ *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II*, by Richard R. Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford (Liturgical Press, 2012)
- ▶ *A Pastoral Commentary on Sacrosanctum Concilium: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2013)
- ▶ *The Liturgy Documents, Volume Three: Foundational Documents on the Origins and Implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2013)

## The Structure of the Document

The document begins with a brief introduction stating the aims of the Second Vatican Council. The largest and most detailed chapter of the *Constitution* is the first, entitled “General Principles for the Restoration and Promotion of the Sacred Liturgy.” It is followed by chapters devoted to the Eucharist, the other sacraments and sacramentals, the Divine Office, the liturgical year, sacred music, and finally, sacred art and furnishings. An appendix on the revision of the calendar appears at the end.

You will note that numbers appear at the beginnings of paragraphs in the document. These paragraph numbers are important because this is how we refer to particular sections in the *Constitution*. So, if you see a citation such as “CSL, 4,” that means that the text comes from the fourth paragraph of the *Constitution*, not its fourth page or fourth chapter.

## Things to Note as You Read

As you read the *Constitution* for the first time, it will be helpful to keep the following information in mind:

- ▶ **The *Constitution* is the first document produced by the Second Vatican Council.** This means that all of the rest of the documents developed by the Council (there were a total of sixteen) are based on the work done in the *Constitution*. The introduction of the document (paragraphs 1-4), which states the overall goals of the Council, and makes it clear that this was meant to serve as a blueprint for renewal. Such a statement is found in no other document of the Second Vatican Council, and it is important for understanding the Council as a whole, as well as for understanding why the liturgical work of the Council was central to its agenda.
- ▶ **The *Constitution* has the standing of permanent law, but it is also a theological statement.** Many passages embody commitments and beliefs that are profoundly theological and inspiring, and well worth meditating on. The theological heart of the *Constitution* is found in the concept of the Paschal Mystery. The Death, Resurrection, and glorification of Jesus is the mystery par excellence that the liturgy celebrates. The Paschal Mystery is presented as the principal

way in which our Lord redeemed us (CSL, 5) and the mystical reality into which we are plunged by our Baptism (CSL, 6). It is the reason why believers have gathered for Eucharist since the time of the Apostles (CSL, 6), and the wellspring of all the sacraments (CSL, 61).

- ▶ **The *Constitution* contains a vigorous theology of the Church.** The liturgy is the “summit and fount” of the life of the Church (CSL, 10). The whole mystical Body of Jesus Christ, head and members, performs the liturgy (CSL, 7). Liturgies are not private functions, but expressions of the Church (CSL, 26), with diverse and complementary ministries and offices that work together for the good of the whole (CSL, 27-29). The document gives a picture of the bishop, the diocese, the parishes, the pastors, and all the baptized forming an organic, ordered unity (CSL, 41-42).

- ▶ **The text of the *Constitution* is full of references and allusions to the liturgical developments of the preceding hundred years.** Some notes are provided (citations from Scripture, the Church Fathers, liturgical texts, and the Council of Trent), but for the most part, it was assumed that the well-educated reader would know the background. Some examples of this are the call for active participation, which echoes the work of Pope Pius X’s 1903 document *Tra le Sollecitudini*. Another example is the expression “noble simplicity” (CSL, 34). This expression comes from the influential essay “The Genius of the Roman Rite,” published by Edmund Bishop near the turn of the twentieth century. Bishop argued that the Roman Rite is characterized by a noble simplicity, soberness, and sense. The Council Fathers wanted to honor and preserve this fundamental quality of the Roman Rite while reforming the liturgy. The text also echoes the work of Pope Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* (1947), by enumerating the ways in which Christ is present in the celebration (see CSL, 7). The *Constitution*, however, adds a new form of “presence” to what was in *Mediator Dei*: Christ’s presence in his Word. This addition to a well-known list would have leapt to the eyes of the document’s first readers. These allusions to Scripture and to the work of previous decades helps us to see that the liturgical renewal in the *Constitution* has its basis in the ancient traditions of the Church and occurred over the course of many years.

- ▶ **Liturgical practices that seem familiar today would have been surprising to people at the time.** Some of the provisions of the *Constitution* refer to liturgical practices that we take for granted today, such as Holy Communion under both forms (CSL, 55) or concelebration (CSL, 57). It is important to remember that these provisions were initially controversial and their acceptance was hard won. Thus, when we see very cautious and limited permissions in these areas, we should remember that they were big steps at the time.

Further development took place gradually over the years that followed the Council.

► **At times, the *Constitution* seems to represent both sides of a discussion.** This is especially true with respect to the Latin. Among the Council Fathers were strong views in favor of the vernacular and in favor of the Latin, and both are represented (see CSL, 36). A “both/and” approach is also evident in the section on music. New compositions are welcomed (CSL, 121) and a variety of instruments may be used (CSL, 120), but Gregorian chant is warmly recommended (CSL, 116) and pipe organs are affirmed (CSL, 120).

### PRIOR TO THE NEXT SESSION

► Read or skim the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in its entirety. Highlight any words or phrases that are interesting, important, beautiful, or confusing to you.

► Reflect on the following questions:

- As you read the *Constitution*, what seems self-evident or familiar?
- As you read the *Constitution*, what surprises you?
- What has been your experience of reading or studying primary texts, such as Church documents, historic statements, or books of the Bible? What challenges have you faced in making sense of such texts? What has helped you to gain a better understanding?
- Everyone brings their own perceptions to the task of reading and interpreting Church documents. Sum up in a few words your general impression of worship in the period after the Second Vatican Council. What questions does your experience raise for you?

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